



WHY HISTORIC DISTRICTS MAKE GOOD SENSE

The 1963 session of the New Hampshire General Court established New Hampshire's historic district enabling legislation. It reads:

"The preservation of structures and places of historic and architectural value is hereby declared to be a public purpose. The heritage of the municipality will be safeguarded by:

I. Preserving a district in the municipality which reflects elements of its cultural, social, economic, political and architectural history;

II. Conserving property values in such district;

III. Fostering civic beauty;

IV. Strengthening the local economy; and

V. Promoting the use of a historic district for the education, pleasure, and welfare of the citizens of the municipality."

[RSA 31:89-a (1963), now RSA 674:45]

In 1992, these purposes were broadened to include cultural resources and community history, and to recognize multiple districts. Historic districting is a strategy that works to preserve both the character and the tax base of a community.

Historic districts and the commissioners who sit on the local historic district commission have a goal to manage change in the district. They encourage continuity and the care of existing properties, while respecting changes over time -- layers of life -- that add architectural richness and visual variety to townscapes. Changes to structures and other compatible new construction is considered as long as any contemporary design is respectful of existing resources.

Perhaps we have already consumed enough of somebody else's assets -- it's time for us to make better use of our own. Historic preservation is a way for us to do that.



Historic district commission should work collaboratively with planning boards to implement the community's desire to safeguard its historic districts.

New Hampshire state law requires that "all districts and regulations shall be compatible with the master plan and zoning ordinance of the city, town, or county in which they exist" [RSA 674:46-a, IV.]. Historic districts are important tools for maintaining local character and for strengthening property values.

Historic district regulations are meant to manage change within the district.

At the state level, developers, investors, planners, and architects who want to be known for excellent work purposely seek out properties in historic districts. It reduces their risk factors; they know up front what the rules are; and they know that the historic district acts as an early warning system to ensure that any changes to surrounding properties (which could affect the value of their investment) will be subject to consistent ground rules and community standards, administered through an open public process in which they or their clients, as abutters, can participate.



A historic district commission can be an important source of expert technical assistance for property owners, helping them to learn and implement historic preservation best practices

One of the things a historic district commission must do, as part of developing a proposed district and ordinance, is to conduct a local historical resources survey which is linked to local and statewide history, themes, and contexts. The Division of Historical Resources can provide how-to advice and some assistance.

Communities that have established a local survey process, a historic district or heritage commission, a historic district ordinance, and a historic district, are eligible to apply for "Certified Local Government" status. If the local historic district ordinance, regulations, and procedures meet special state and federal program standards, the municipal government enters into a "Certification Agreement" to establish the basic historic preservation performance standards that the entire municipality -- not just the historic district commission alone -- must fulfill in order to become and remain certified. After they meet the certification standards, the "CLGs" become part of a technical assistance and information-sharing network with the DHR and other CLGs, which strengthens the local preservation program. They are also eligible to apply for federal matching grants from a special pass-through fund set aside for the exclusive use of Certified Local Governments. CLGs are monitored regularly to ensure that they continue to meet program requirements and can remain eligible for CLG funds and services.

The In 1992 the state legislature enabled a new tool for communities: heritage commissions, which give local governments in New Hampshire the ability to recognize and prioritize historical and cultural resources. Unlike historic district commissions, whose responsibilities are limited to specific parts of a community, heritage commissions are intended to have a town-wide or city-wide scope, and a range of activities that is determined by each individual municipality.

Historic districts encourage reinvestment

Donovan Rypkema, Place Economics

Historic preservation does have a measurable economic effect on a community. This impact is not only as an economic activity in general, but in comparison to new construction in particular...Suppose a community is choosing between spending \$1,000,000 in new construction and spending \$1,000,000 on rehabilitation. What would the differences be?

- \$120,000 more dollars will initially stay in the community with rehabilitation than with new construction.
- 5 to 9 more construction jobs will be created with rehabilitation than with new construction.
- 4.7 more new jobs will be created elsewhere in the community with rehabilitation than with new construction.
- Household incomes in the community will increase \$107,000 more with rehabilitation than with new construction.
- Retail sales in the community will increase \$142,000 as a result of that \$1 million of rehabilitation expenditure -- \$34,000 more than with \$1,000,000 of new construction.
- Real estate companies, lending institutions, personal service vendors, and eating and drinking establishments will all receive more monetary benefit from \$1,000,000 in rehabilitation than from \$1,000,000 in new construction...

Historic preservation makes sense in large measure because historic preservation makes dollars and cents, but it also saves dollars and cents. Historic preservation is a rational and effective economic response to overconsumption. To make a new brick today to build a building on a site where there is already a building standing steals from two generations. It steals from the generation that built the brick originally by throwing away their asset before its work is done, and it steals from a future generation by using increasingly scarce natural resources today that should have been saved for tomorrow.



Heritage commissions do for cultural resources what conservation commissions do for natural resources. Functionally, heritage commissions are somewhere between historical societies and historic district commissions, with their precise role determined locally. And while their primary duties are to advise and assist other local boards and commissions, including the planning board, heritage commissions are also empowered to accept and expend funds for a non-lapsing heritage fund, and to acquire and manage property and property rights.

Some communities have heritage commissions that are only advisory, but others want their commissions to take a much more active role, and to assume the responsibilities of a historic district commission. And all of these are local decisions, authorized by the state enabling legislation: it gives communities a menu, not a mandate.

When communities consider creating heritage commissions or historic districts, it's easy to get distracted by procedures and processes and legalistic technicalities; but those are details. The principal reason for having a historic district (or several) is that a historic district is a community's way of taking a deep breath and a long look around at itself and saying, "This is special. This is important to all of us in many different ways. This is too good to waste. This is a place we should take care of together."

Taking time to establish historic districts is a good investment. A historic district helps citizens to recognize and appreciate the often-overlooked (or taken-for-granted) values of time and place and helps to keep those values in place. It reminds us to look for richness of detail in our "everyday" environment.



Historic districts are an ideal tool for focusing a community's attention and fostering wise decisions that, over the years, add up to a whole that has value and meaning greater than any of its separate parts.

Making the effort to establish and to maintain historic districts is an effective way to acknowledge the character and meaning of our community life, with its three-dimensional heritage of people, places, and patterns.

Historic districts help us to recognize and fulfill our responsibility both to the past and, simultaneously, to the future.

Historic districting is a public process for the public benefit. The more people who are involved in the process, the better -- and the more popular -- the final results will be.

